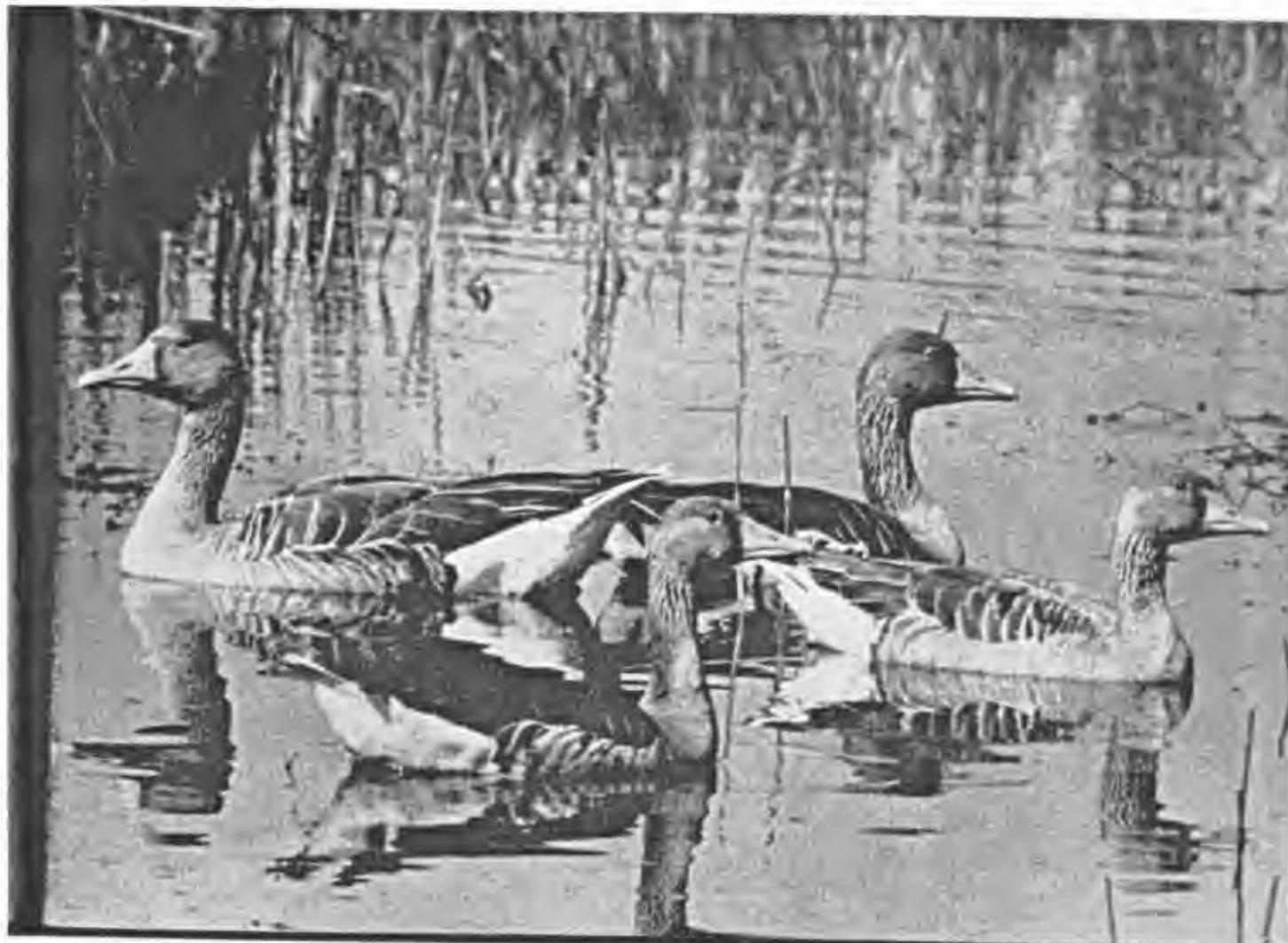


# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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VOL. XVI NO. 10 OCTOBER 1976



NEWSLETTER FOR  
BIRD WATCHERS

Volume XVI No.10

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FROM SALIM ALI'S NOTEBOOK - Ed.

The Newsletter is fortunate in being privileged to reproduce material from Salim Ali's notebooks. Over many years it was his practice to make notes on the spot in the field, in a sort of a shorthand, and to type them out on reaching camp.

We start this exciting series with Salim Ali's notes on ELEPHANTA

Trip I - 8 February 1942

Coastal periphery - above mangrove belt and up to about 200 yards in places - to base of hills.

Otocompsa emeria the common bulbul of the island.

Denanthe atrocaerulea - 2 solos in barren, stony patch at base of quarry, identical facies to that in its breeding grounds (e.g. Shiber Pass, N. Afghanistan)

Phoenicurus ochruros - a single male.

Muscicapa porva - 2 solos

Lanius schach - solo

Motacilla a. dukhunensis - ca. 20

Motacilla personata - Solo. The only

♂

Haliaeetus leucocephalus - pair. Evidently the only.

Vultures very numerous. Circling high overhead all day like cranes, in large congregations. Pseudogyps nesting on Borassus palms and on Bonyan and other large trees. At least 6 nests!

Notable absences from Elephanta:

Corvus macrorhynchos

Dendrocitta vagabunda

Turdoides somervilliei

Pycnonotus luteolus

Passer domesticus

Gymnorhina xanthocollis

Woodpeckers, Pipits

Eastern side of island (pier side) rock scarp and quarry, littered with stones and boulders, with sparse grass in crevices and occasional bushes of Lantana, Vitex and Anona (sitaphal)?. Borassus and Pongamia plentiful in coastal periphery of island. Several examples of Bombax now in flower. Only 1 Erythrina indica. Why so scarce? Only coastal periphery of island investigated - above mangrove belt and shore upto ca. 200 yards wide in places reaching more or less to base of hill. Along the eastern rocky shore some Pandanus brakes!

Motacilla a. dukhunensis feeding on squelchy mud among mangroves.

Phoenicurus ochruros - only 1 male

Milvus covinda on nest on Borassus

Vultures bathing and drinking at drying-up tank at noon.

Cynclus batassiensis hawking over mangroves.

Pastor roseus and Uricolus oriolus absent

Ploceus philippinus. No birds but a colony of ca. 20 old nests on date palm along path to caves, mostly on eastern side of tree.

Otocompsa much commoner than Molpester, of which only 2!

Demigretta asha Gray: White: 1:4

Uroloncha malabarica. Several roosting in old nest in babool. 3 nests in same tree.

Aridotheres tristis - one completely bald head and neck - yellowish bare skin - like vulture!

#### Trip II - 15 February 1942

Feature of forest on W. side (Gun Hill) near hilltop abundance of large woody twiners and climbers, Entada and Derris.

Pseudogyps nesting abundantly on W. slope of Gun Hill from above coastal belt to near top, on Pongamia, Grewia and miscellaneous trees often covered with a tangle of creepers. 20 nests counted within about 10 acres. Higher up, towards the top, almost every tree holds one or two nests. Several contain half-grown feathered young.

Ptyonoprogne hawking on shore with H. rustica.

Alcedo atthis - solo on rocks on shore.

Demisorex asha - 3 slaty: 1 white: 1 intermediate.

Standing idly on rock islanded by incoming tide.

Do they wait for low tide to feed?

Dicrurus longicaudatus - solo eating nectar from Bombax

Dryobates mahogany - A pair. "klick, klick-r-r"

Probably nesting or about to in Bombax as kept flitting about.

Phylloscopus trachiloides - only 1. "Chi-wee". Why are migratory Phylloscopus sp scarce? Almost absent.

Passer domesticus - a few about B.S.N.C's office

Cinnyris asiatica probing into flowers of Heterophragma roxburghii

House Crows are apparently only day trippers here. Loose parties were observed flying back in the evening towards Bombay and Navha on 8th.

Loranthus longiflorus on Crateva religiosa

Viscum very abundant on Grewia, and Loranthus extremely rare on Grewia. WHY?

According to a local resident, vultures have increased enormously on the island in the last 10 years. Ted palms were abundant before this influx, but are now being fast killed off by their droppings.

Why is no Loranthus seen parasiting palms?

## BIRDING IN THE ANDAMANS

Romulus Whitaker

I recently visited South and North Andaman Islands for an investigation of crocodile nesting areas. During my one month stay (May 27 - June 30) I had a chance to do considerable walking in some of the out of the way forest areas. Being an average of only 20 miles wide the main Andaman Islands are not the massive impassable jungles we might think. With the exception of the 300 sq. mile Reserve for the Jarawa (negrito tribes who quite rightly resent any intrusion into their area), all parts of the main islands are visited by Karens (Burmese tribes settled in North Andaman) in their boats on pig hunting and shell collecting trips and on foot by people like the Ranchis who go pig hunting with their dogs. Areas officially described as remote and unsettled are in fact often already illegally settled (whenever fresh water is available) and being cleared. There is still a lot of primary forest and an incredible abundance of the smaller wildlife. My main interests were herpetological but bird life, even in monsoon, was rich and very interesting. I compiled the following checklist of the Andamans and Nicobars from Bonnington's 1931 census, and the Field Guide to Birds of Southeast Asia by King, Woodcock and Dickinson lacking any further references the list probably needs nomenclature correction and some additions. Response from readers would be appreciated.

1

The Andamans and Nicobars Forest Department is taking up Wildlife protection in a big way. In Gazette No.46 of 9-1-1976 the following birds are now on the fully protected list.

1. Emerald Dove
2. Hornbills
3. Jungle & Spur Fowl
4. Orioles
5. Owls
6. Partridges
7. Quails

In addition some months of the year are closed for hunting the Andaman Teal and Imperial Green Pigeon. The wisdom of introducing and now protecting exotic birds like Jungle fowl and partridges is questionable. Island ecosystems are particularly delicate and serious problems have already resulted from the introduction of other exotics (like the spotted deer and Giant African Snail).

Some years back members of a BNHS team noticed that a small island near Great Nicobar which was being used for shelling practice by the Indian Navy was an important nesting area of the Nicobar pigeon. The Navy very appropriately stopped the shelling of that island when the fact was pointed out to them. It would be helpful if surveys from the ornithological and other aspects were undertaken on the islands for the purpose of identifying areas of special importance for protection. For example there is a large freshwater lake on North Reef Island for about 10 months of the year which is a feeding and likely breeding ground of thousands of the endemic Andaman Teal. Perhaps readers would send other examples of wetlands and other important natural bird habitat to the Chief Wildlife Warden, Port Blair, with a copy to the National Committee on Environmental Planning and Coordination in the Ministry of Science & Technology, New Delhi.

It is very interesting to spend time talking to long-time residents of the islands. Our friend Mr. Jerry Vaughan of Police Radio told us about the megapode. In 1951 Jerry set up the first wireless station on Kondol I near Great Nicobar. During November and December the Nicobarese tribals would regularly bring megapode eggs to trade for rice (6 eggs for one cigarette tin of rice). The eggs were large, he said but not so tasty. There appeared to be an average of 10 eggs per nest. Once Jerry watched a pair of megapodes digging their nest using feet and wings. After digging the hole 2-2½ ft deep the female laid her clutch of eggs and both covered the hole, creating a mound of sand about as high as the hole was deep. The nests are usually located at the edge of the beach where the jungle begins; often in the sand at the base of large old trees (between buttresses).

Jerry took one of the fresh eggs back to Port Blair with him in a cigarette tin just to show to friends. 30 days later the megapode chick hatched and pushed its way out of the tin under Jerry's bed. The chick was well developed with a completely fuzzy body. There was no trace of the egg shell in the tin.

Every conceivable type of food was offered but the chick ate very little and soon died.

Birds seen in Andamans from 27-5-1976 to 30-6-1976

South Andaman: Magpie robin, White-breasted Kingfisher, Imperial pigeon, White-breasted water hen, Green bittern, Storkbill Kingfisher, Red-breasted Parakeet, Philippine Starling, Crow Pheasant, Andaman Swiftlet, Common Swallow, Red-rumped Swallow, Common Myna, Blackheaded Bulbul, Sunbird, Jungle Crow, Cuckoo-Shrike, Sandpiper, Ringed Plover, Purple Heron, Little Egret, Pond Heron, House Sparrow, Pipit, Yellow Wagtail, Flower-pecker.

North Andaman: Loriquet, Whiteheaded myna, White-bellied sea eagle, Red whiskered Bulbul, Tern, Drongo, Racket-tailed Drongo, Oriole, White Scavenger Vulture, Green Pigeon, Emerald Dove, Andaman Teal, White-rumped Shama, Brown Dove, Serpent Eagle, Minivet, Brown Hawk Owl, Nightjar, Owllet, Alexandrine Parakeet, Long-tailed Parakeet, Chestnut headed bee-eater, Reed Warbler, Watercock, Beach Stone Plover, Moorhen, Osprey.

(Romulus Whitaker has listed 205 species of birds of the Andaman and Nicobar islands. Copies can be loaned to anyone on request. Editor).

DROUGHT FOOD OF PYCNONOTUS CAFER AND PSITTACULA KRAMERI  
IN THE RAJASTHAN DESERT

B.D. Rana

The Redvented Bulbul, Pyconotus cafer and Roseringed Parakeet, Psittacula krameri are distributed throughout the Indian subcontinent. But little is known about their feeding biology.\* These birds are in the main, devourers of fruit in orchards, and several other varieties of crops.

The mean annual rainfall during 1970 was 218.2 mm, which was considerably below the average of 300 mm. The mean annual maximum and minimum temperatures were 34.4°C and 21.0°C, respectively. The relative humidity ranged from 30 to 82 per cent during the year. Keeping in view the scarcity of food during this drought year an attempt was made to investigate their food. The crop and gizzard contents of the birds were analysed and identified as per techniques described earlier.

Food of Pyconotus cafer:

Nineteen crops of Pyconotus cafer revealed that grape fruit constituted 18.7 per cent of the total crop content. Bajra grains were found to be 10.9 per cent. The bird also thrives on wild fruit and flowers of Zizyphus nummularia (26.4 per cent) and Coldenia procera (10.7 per cent) respectively. The

\* While it is true that the feeding biology of most birds are unknown much work has been done on the Roseringed Parakeet by the ICBR and others.

fruit of Grevia assatica tree (15.6 per cent) and insects (17.4 per cent) were included in its diet. The Yellowvented Bulbul (Pycnonotus goiavier) also fed on various kinds of ripe fruit and insects.

#### Food of Psittacula krameri:

The Rose-ringed Parakeet is regarded to be a frugivorous bird but the analysis of the crop contents of thirtyfive Psittacula krameri indicated that they mainly feed on Bajra (45.21 per cent) and jowar (38.3 per cent). Eighty per cent of the total food consists of food grains only. Other meagre food items included green pods of Albizzia lebbek (6.51 per cent), Dolichos lablab (2.66 per cent) and the pulp of Zizyphus mauritiana fruit (6.00 per cent). This bird is also reported to be a visitant on mustard and bajra crops respectively.

It may, therefore, be concluded that these two birds are harmful to fruit and cereal crops causing a great loss to agro-horticultural products.

#### Acknowledgements

The author is grateful to Dr. H.S. Mann, Director of the Institute and Dr. Ishwar Prakash, Animal Ecologist, for encouragement and guidance in preparing the manuscript.

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#### LIKE TRAILING CLOUDS OF GLORY

(From the Greenfinger Gazette, Yeshwanthnagar, Maharashtra)

Last winter Vasant Bhoslu, our gardener, had brought a couple of bayas' nests for the handicraft exhibition. It was too late, then, to go and find where they built. But this is just the season for their nest building, so taking Vasant with us as guide, we set out on Sunday, 25th morning through sugarcane and maize fields, by lanes among the bagasse heaps to the southeastern corner of the factory where the second well (our drinking water) lies.

Even before we came within sight of the colony we heard the clamour of these birds- the chirp, twitter and the intermittent whistle. We went round the well of the pumping house and stationed ourselves on the concrete wall of the rectangular well to watch.

The baya, the weaver bird ('sugran' in Marathi) is exactly the size of the sparrow, the same markings on the wing, the same seedcrackers Finch beak, but a beautiful yellow on the head and below the throat on the front. The female is rather drab, just a hint of the gold, otherwise a sparrow.

Here, the bayas have chosen a neem tree overhanging the water for their snakecharmers 'bun' nests. They always build over water (a stream or a deserted well) so that no predator can get at the eggs or the fledgeling. The two compartments, two entries, pendulous nest is a marvel of construction. As we sat in stillness, we saw the male birds fly away again and again, to return with a long strand of a particular grass ('levali') held in the beak. It is a thing to remember: 'Like trailing clouds of glory do we come'.

We watched the weaver actually at work (in some of the nests the grass strand was still green), sticking one end into the fabric and working it in and out downward. Occasionally, the thing would fall into water, upon which away flew the bird to bring a fresh one. We saw and heard only the male working incessantly and squabbling. The female would appear briefly, dive upwards from the lower opening and emerge the same way. Intruders were driven away in much temper and agitation. A rambler asked how the first strand were knotted on to the branch of the tree, so that the nest hung free and clear. Like migration, the baya's nest is a wonder of instinctive manipulation.

We came away reluctantly, to return to school for breakfast. On the way back, we saw the white-breasted kingfisher (gentleman dressed for dinner) and the redwattled lapwing (did you do it, did you do it?). A drongo kept us company for a while, and the coucal boomed. An ashy wren warbler popped up on the pink blossom of the cassia grandis. In our favourite garden, the iora sang for us: it is a songster without peer - at least in this location.

#### U.S. BIRDERS FLOCK FOR GLIMPSE OF RARE DUCK

By William Claiborne

(N.Y. Herald Tribune of 13-1-1976, Vol. I page 201).

Newport, R.I., Jan. 12 (WP). The vanguard of what is expected to be thousands of avid bird watchers is descending upon this resort city to see the smew, handsome black and white Siberian waterfowl that migrated nearly half the earth's circumference in the wrong direction.

However, a few of the binocular-totting curios already have left the bitterly cold, windswept marshland, complaining about the weather and wondering if the smew is the only strange duck around here.

"I should have taken up stamp collecting", said Ivan Witty, a retired engineer from Northboro, Mass., as he packed up his tripod and 30-power telescope and headed home from what many bird watchers call the sight of a life-time.

The smew, a duck related to the large merganser species, was first sighted at Green End Pond here two weekends ago. Since then, ornithologists have concluded it migrated from Siberia or northern Finland.

#### First Sighting

It is the first sighting of a smew on the Atlantic Coast and only the fourth North American sighting in Audubon Society history.

The temperatures of near zero (Fahrenheit) are only partly to blame for the frustrations felt by Mr. Witty and others. Even more disconcerting was the bird's seeming disdain for his followers, as they attempted to creep within viewing range. The smew repeatedly took wing and flew away from his pursuers.

"This is one of the wariest birds I've seen", said Peter Polshuk, 18, a New Yorker who drove more than three hours and got lost twice on his way.

The day's hunt for the smew began early Friday at Green End Pond, an idyllic setting protected from the biting wind by stands of pine trees and close enough to the road to observe from the warmth of a car.

The pond also turned out to be the habitat for nothing more exciting than a few mallards, two white domestic ducks and a flock of coots, a species of water fowl so common that most self-respecting bird watchers would not even put them on their life list of sighted birds.

#### Attention Turns

By noon, the shrinking contingent turned attention away from the small pond to the frozen panorama of Easton Pond.

"I think I see him", announced Dr. James Mansfield, a retired physician from Lincoln, Mass., swinging his binocular toward a causeway separating the big pond from the ice-gray ocean.

Dr. Mansfield said he, his wife and a friend had heard about the smew on the Audubon Society's recorded daily bird alert and had abandoned plans for another vacation trip to drive hurriedly to Newport.

In a motorcade, the bird watchers then drove around Easton Pond in pursuit of Dr. Mansfield's sighting and began a foot-numbing trek across an ankle-deep spillway and a 500-yard dike stretching into the center of the pond.

To Mr. Polshuk, the effort did not seem extraordinary. He said he had driven all night to Delaware to sight a white-winged black tern, had travelled to South America for birding and had stood hours in the cold at Newburyport the day after Christmas for a glimpse of a Ross's gull, another rare Arctic bird.

### Making of Lists

Bird watchers, who call themselves birders, compile life lists of birds, Mr. Polshok explained, and, the longer the life list becomes, the more challenging the sport.

Or, as Mr. Witty explained it: "I've been birding for 25 years, and this bird gives me 431 birds on my life list. They're hard to come by when you get over 400."

When the pursuit begins to wear thin, the birders go abroad, compiling European lists, African lists or South American lists.

How can I explain why we do it? All I can say is that once you begin, you can't stop," said Mr. Witty.

He conceded that he is "not as crazy as the young kids today," a generation of college-aged birders who seem as fervent in their cause as the generation of campus protesters that preceded them.

The birders - young and old - kept up their pursuit here, however, as the smew led them from the windy dike, around the big pond, across a shaky plank over a canal, back around the pond, and through waist-high bull-rushes behind a service station.

### Takes Wing

East time they came within several hundred yards of the bird, it took wing with a flourish and a spray of water and returned approximately to the place it had just left.

Lee Gardner, a Newport bird watcher, said 200 people came to the pond Thursday to see the smew and that he expected hundreds, possibly thousands more. Mr. Gardner and others said the smew has been feeding in the pond, diving for fish frequently. It also spends a lot of its time with a flock of American mergansers in the few unfrozen parts of the pond. Ornithologists say they are convinced that the smew migrated from Siberia, possibly by way of the Arctic or perhaps by stopping off in Greenland. They determined that he is genuinely wild by the absence of any bands or identification markings that would indicate prior captivity.

They also said the smew probably will winter here as long as the pond is not completely frozen over and will likely migrate north again in the summer.

The smew, *Mergus albellus*, migrates to north India, though it is a rare visitor. Reference Volume I, HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN, p.201. Ed.

## SOME FURTHER VIEWS ON OLFACTION IN BIRDS

A. Navarro

With reference to the note "Olfaction in Birds" published in the last issue of this paper, I should like to mention that quite a long time ago this paper published a twentyone question quiz about bird facts. I answered the first question: Do birds have a sense of smell?

I gave three instances to prove that vultures have no sense of smell.

The first instance was of a buffalo that was found dead under the culvert of a bridge... A week elapsed and the carcass was burnt to relieve the neighbours from the unpleasant odours and the hordes of flies.

The second instance was of a cow killed by a panther. After a good meal, the panther dragged the carcass and hid it under cover of heavy foliage. The vultures never discovered the carcass.

And the third instance was of another kill, in which the panther had also hidden the carcass. This time the vultures discovered the carcass by the behaviour of the crows and the appearance of jackals and pariah dogs.

The three instances happened at different dates, though all were within an area of about six or seven square miles, with abundant vultures flying and soaring in the sky.

On another occasion, I saw a mochi removing the hide of a buffalo. That was about 12.00 noon. Three hours later, with the purpose of having a few shots at the vultures feeding on the carcass, I went once more to the spot. I found only a skeleton with a few crows and mynas feeding on the tit-bits of flesh left by the vultures.

What are the opinions of scientists and ornithologists with regard to this subject?

Olfaction in Birds

The nostrils of birds have more than one purpose: we call them the primary purpose and the secondary.

The primary purpose has a dual function: the aeration of the lungs and the thermoregulation of the bird's system which in the opinion of scientists is unique in the animal kingdom.

The secondary purpose is to provide the bird with the sense of smell. The author of "Fundamentals of Ornithology", J. Van Tyne, in his chapter on Senses and Behaviour, explaining the olfaction of birds, says: "The debate over the olfactory powers of birds has continued for over a century".

Many ornithologists have gone through a very laborious research programme and experiments on this subject. It is curious to note that most of the birds selected for their experiments have been vultures, pigeons, parakeets, ducks, and siskins. In all cases, the results have never been fully satisfactory; very often negative results have been obtained.

In the last paragraph of the same chapter quoted above, the author says: "Based on morphological evidence, however, we must assume that some birds have a sense of smell but that by and large, this sense is so poorly developed in birds that its influence on behaviour is little understood."

Let us see what Dr. Salim Ali says in his introduction to the "Book of Indian Birds": Of the senses, those of sight and hearing are most highly developed in birds, that of taste is comparatively poor, while smell is practically absent." This statement from one of the outstanding ornithologists of our day, and all other books dealing with a variety of subjects on birds, mainly anatomy and physiology, all maintain the same view as regards the sense of smell in birds: ".... that the sense of smell is practically absent."

#### MASS MIGRATION OF THE ROSY PASTOR

Liyaqatullah Khan and Indra Kumar Sharma

At Jodhpur we have been observing small flocks of 5 to 15 Rosy Pastors (*Sturnus roseus*) mainly in July (arrival) and again in March (departure) for the last five years. In March (1976) it was observed in unusually large numbers in larger flocks of 30 to 80. The flocks were mainly concentrated in groves of Peepul trees (*Ficus religiosa*) which were laden with figs. It appears that the pastor is fond of figs. It was observed roosting in hundreds with parakeets and mynas in a large grove of Neem (*Azadirachta indica*), Peepul and *Albizia lebbeck* of the Railway colony. In the countryside it was observed on peepul trees and other trees like *Maytenus emarginatus* and *Salvadora* spp. We observed it taking pollen-grains and the anthers of *Capparis decidua* and *Tecomella undulata*, fruits of *Maytenus*, *Capparis*, figs of *Ficus* spp and moths on the *Crotalaria burhia*.

The probable causes of mass migration of the Rosy-pastor in this year are:

1. Local people grow large numbers of Peepul trees in Jodhpur urban and suburban areas as it is considered a sacred tree. These trees profusely provide the favourite food-figs to the birds in March when they arrive on the way to their breeding grounds.
2. *Capparis*, *Maytenus*, *Salvadora* and *Tecomella* abundantly grow in the countryside and these provide food and resting stations enroute.

3. This year March and April (upto the second week) were comparatively cool having an overcast sky, the maximum temperature did not rise above 40°C and this probably prolonged the stay of visitors.

It is noteworthy that the Rosy pastor is the earliest to arrive in the month of July and the latest to depart in April. Most migratory birds in Jodhpur region arrive in October and depart in early March.

#### CORRESPONDENCE

##### AN OWL IN COONOR

Sarah Jameson

A few days ago, I spent the evening with some friends whose house is on the eastern edge of Coonoor, adjacent to the shola I wrote to you about recently.

On August 9th at 10 p.m. it was a beautiful, clear, still night with a full moon. As I was stepping out of the house to walk to my car, I was arrested by a strange call which I had never heard before. I quickly got my torch from the car, and being guided by the direction of the sound, I fortunately found the source of the calls almost at once. There was a tall eucalyptus tree just outside the compound, which was almost devoid of branches, but had odd bunches of leaves here and there all the way up. Next morning I judged the tree to be about eighty feet high, and the two eyes reflected back were near a clump of leaves about half way up the tree. The land round about is fairly steep and adjoins the shola, and is a secluded area. We stood watching and listening for some time. The head was moved about now and then, but two eyes were often simultaneously reflected, proving without doubt that it was an owl. We could see the rough outline of a small body, but alas in spite of the clear moonlight and the torch, we could not make out any colouration. The owl called several times, each time the same one note call. My regret is that I did not time the gap between each call, but there must have been at least 30 seconds between each call. One of my friends said it sounded as though the owl had a sore throat, and really, that was quite an accurate description! We were fairly close, but I imagine the sound would carry quite a long distance.

I am very interested in bird calls, and have taped many and though I have heard various owls all over India I have never heard anything like this before. As soon as I reached home I got out all my books, and went carefully through the descriptions of all the owls, and by a process of elimination, I was left with one exciting answer. It appeared to be the Chestnutbacked Barred Owl of Ceylon!

I quote from Salim Ali's HANDBOOK Volume III page 288; .... "Size Myna minus

FIELD CHARACTERS As of 636 q.v. also without ear-tufts, but upper parts chestnut, narrowly cross-barred with blackish, below white, longitudinally

streaked with olive brown on abdomen instead of barred. Sexes alike.

STATUS DISTRIBUTION & HABITAT Resident, race peculiar to Ceylon. Widely distributed in small numbers throughout the dense forests of the Wet zone and western aspects of the hills up to 6300 ft. Phillips. Its range reported to be dwindling owing to clearance of forests for plantations, etc.

GENERAL HABITS Frequents the tops of tall trees, usually on steep hillsides. Very diurnal in habits, often hunting and calling in broad daylight, but very shy and wary, and seldom seen. (Henry).

FOOD Mainly insects; also mice, small birds, lizards etc.

VOICE & CALLS 'A curious note like Kraw kraw kraw kraw kraw (the 'r' accentuated) which carries a long distance.'

The description of the call is unlike any other owl call, and is exactly as I heard it - except that it uttered only one 'kraw' at a time, and not five. If the natural habitat of the Chestnutbacked Barred Owl is slowly being destroyed, it will be forced to seek a similar environment elsewhere, or face extinction. I do not know whether owls have been known to fly over open sea. If this is impossible, perhaps they could come as stowaways on vessels. Judging by the map, it is about a 60 mile gap between the closest points of India and Ceylon. Ceylon lies below the tenth parallel, the Nilgiris lie roughly between the eleventh and twelfth which is not very different. The temperatures, rains, insects, etc; must be much the same in the wet forested areas, and so I presume the Nilgiris and southwestern hills would be another home from home to this owl.

I would be very interested to read your comments, and whether there have been other reports of this call (I cannot definitely yet presume it is the Ceylon Owl!) from South India?

#### KING CROW UNDER ATTACK

Shanta Neville

To the letter "King Crow under attack", by Md. Ali Reza Khan, I would like to tell you about my own observations of those interesting birds.

Three years back I released four young Drongos (*Dicrurus adsimilis*). There were up till then no Drongos resident in close vicinity. All four of them stayed and made their home here in a territory of about 3 km square. Two of them married "outsiders" and did not want (or need) to come for food any longer. The two others, although on a permanent war-path, are about daily, roosting on my head, etc.

Many times I have seen the one or the other of my Drongos harass Crows, screaming wildly. Twice I have seen (to my horrified apprehension) my

Drongo chasing a Hawk. Yes, the Hawk actually turned tail (both *Accipiter nisus* and *bedius*) and the Drongo fairly bursting with pride returned, still screaming, to land on my hand. - Rather exaggerated over self confidence, don't you think? - But: This same plucky Drongo lets himself be chased by a mere female House Sparrow. Sitting at the food tray, hardly having had one mouth-full, the female can easily chase him right back into the tree. Whereas the male Sparrow gets quite a different reception: The Drongo just catches hold of the Sparrow's head-feathers with his beak and holds him thus dangling in midair for a good moment and then disdainfully lets go of him.

The Drongo's eye-sight is marvellous. When I throw crickets in the air, the Drongos catch them without fail before the curve of my throw even reached its height. But if I throw a roach of the same size and colour, they never so much as leave their perch, having seen and recognised the thing at the very instant it leaves my hand. They are very lovely, admirable and interesting birds indeed.

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There is a Warbler (*Phylloscopus inornatus?*) coming to my garden every November. I recognise him by his acquired taste for date-paste (put out by me for the Bulbuls). His exact date of arrival I cannot state, as it is not certain that I would notice his presence immediately. But his exact date of departure I know: It is the very day of April full-moon.

This coincidence only dawned on me this time, when my attention was specially focussed on the moon phase for some other reason. And I checked with my notes of the previous years: Warbler's departure:

1973:	17th April
1974:	6th April
1975:	25th April
1976:	14th April

His imminent departure is in some way predictable by his growing appetite. Probably building up a little energy reserve for his journey. The sunbirds (*Nectarina zeylonica*) seem to be very specially vexed by the Warbler's presence.

#### VISION IN BIRDS

Hamida Saiduzzafar

This is with reference to the correspondence section in the Newsletter of September 1976, regarding "Vision in birds", by T.V. Jose.

It appears that the author's observation of a koel colliding with a white-washed wall must have been an accident in some unusual circumstance --- i.e. the bird may have been chased, or may have had its attention diverted in some way momentarily. It has been generally observed that koels fly very fast, and is it not true that among humans also, it is the fast car-drivers

who most often come to grief? From this, one does not conclude that all humans have poor eyesight --- although in humans the vision varies much more than in birds.

As a whole, birds have the highest visual acuity among vertebrates. Their eyes are adapted for extremely efficient central as well as peripheral vision; thus some species have got two foveae\* (yellow-spots), while others such as some varieties of snipe, can see as far as the backs of their heads without turning around. The bird with the poorest vision is the Kiwi. There is no reason, therefore, to believe that koels have poorer vision than other similar species.

As regards the other question which has been raised, as to whether the discrimination (form sense) is inborn or acquired, I would say that like other traits, it is mostly inborn; but there is some variation from one species to another as in the case of certain species of birds which can be taught to simulate human speech-sounds. Some birds, such as domestic hens have an unusually highly developed retinal cone-system, therefore they can be "taught" colour-discrimination more easily than form-sense.

\* e.g. Kingfisher and birds of prey.

#### BIRDING IN THE LIONTAILED MACAQUE SANCTUARY

Sarah Jameson

The September issue of the Newsletter has just arrived, with the very interesting article by Md. Ali Reza Khan, "Birding in the Liontailed Macaque Sanctuary". One thing however puzzles me, and I can only think it is a printer's error - it cannot be Reza's! On page 3 he writes .."Brilliantly coloured Scarlet Minivets (*Pericrocotus flammeus*), 2 scarlet males and 2 orange females". I quote from Dr. Salim Ali's Birds of Kerala, with reference to *Pericrocotus flammeus*. "Female; yellowish grey above, bright lemon yellow below. Forehead and short supercilium bright lemon yellow. Wings & tail black and yellow."

In this same article, Reza Khan states that the Travancore Yellow Checked Tit "has a very well-defined backwardly directed crest". You have requested comments on this statement since you have found that photographs indicate that the crest has a forward not a backward, direction. This has intrigued me, since I remember that the Yellow Checked Tit I saw here had an upright crest. I have looked up Dr. Salim Ali's Book of Indian Birds and find that the illustration on page 6 shows a slightly backward pointing crest. In his Indian Hill Birds he writes, "while singing, the crest stands erect". In Birds of Kerala, the illustration shows the crest as pointing forwards. To confuse matters further, the illustration in Whistler shows the crest as erect! Perhaps the truth of the matter is that the crest moves about depending on the mood of the bird!

In this same issue of the Newsletter, I was interested to read Mr. Gupta's comments about Indian Rollers, Black Drongos and other birds hawking insects round lamps in Patna as late as 10 p.m. This reminds me that in Durgarh (in West Bengal, 2 miles from the Bihar border), we used to play night tennis in the hot weather to avoid the worst of the heat. The court was surrounded by high powered bulbs, and invariably, there were Black Drongos hawking insects round the lights for as long as we played. I cannot now remember the time, but on occasion, the lights must have been on later than 10 p.m. I never noticed any birds other than Black Drongos at that time.

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